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Photo Essay - Inside the Myth: A Week at Russia's Vaganova Academy

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The fifth-year boys' class, instructed by pedagogue Nikita Scheglov, demonstrates an arabesque at the barre in the Marina Semyonova Studio. Semyonova, shown in the large portrait, was the first Soviet ballerina. She graduated in 1925, yet she remains a constant reminder of balletic excellence for today's students.

Inside the Myth: A Week at Russia's Vaganova Academy

Jenifer Sarver

St. Petersburg's Vaganova Academy holds a revered, almost mythical, place in the insular world of classical ballet. Founded in 1773, it was originally located in a wing of the Tsar's Winter Palace. Thus, the Academy was, from its very inception, an elite institution. Its purpose was to train and mold young dancers into artists for the stage of the Mariinsky Theater, a nine-year process of careful and continuous work and dedication on the parts of both students and teachers. In 1836, the Academy was

moved to 2 Rossi Street, which then became known throughout the ballet world as "Theater Street." It continues to inhabit this neoclassical building, which is the color of creamed butter and encompasses a full city block. It was in this building that Anna Pavlova,

Vaslav Nijinsky and Mikhail Fokine were trained before they emigrated and changed forever the face of ballet in the West.

During the Soviet period, the Academy was known as the State Academic and Choreographic Institute and was

headed during the dark Stalinist days by the renowned pedagogue Agrippina Vaganova. The system of ballet training she developed during her tenure at the Academy is the most systematic and scientific method of ballet training that exists. Today, it is followed and emulated by ballet teachers and academies all over the world. One of the distinguishing characteristics of this training method is the intense personal and professional respect and devotion that exists between the Academy's teachers (known, respectfully, as "pedagogues") and their pupils.

The Academy is regarded as a treasure of the Russian nation, and is not open to visitors aside from a week-long international teachers' seminar held every June. During this seminar, ballet professors from around the



Pedagogue Galina Enikeeva adjusts her fourth-year student's écarté position in the Semyonova Studio.



First-, second- and third-year students rehearse The Sleeping Beauty. From the very beginning of their time at the Academy, professional standards of behavior are taught and expected.



Sixth- and seventh-year students enjoy a light moment during a Laurencia rehearsal.



The fourth-year girls' class stands in the fifth position, a full 180-degree rotation of the legs supported by correct muscle development. The position is a hallmark of Vaganova's system of ballet training.



Fourth- and seventh-year students rehearse The Sleeping Beauty.

world are invited to view class demonstrations, lectures, rehearsals and the Academy's Graduation Performance. This Graduation Performance marks the beginning of the professional lives of the dancers who have completed their training, and one of the most celebrated events in the cultural calendar of St. Petersburg. In 2015, this performance featured the first act of *The Sleeping Beauty*, the third act of



Students from the first-year class (in pale blue), together with those of the graduating class, rehearse the first act of The Sleeping Beauty for the Graduation Performance.

Laurencia, and Balanchine's *Raymonda Variations*. With support from a BSU Center for the Advancement of Scholarship and Research (CARS) Faculty and Librarian Research Grant (FLRG), I attended this seminar in 2015. My photographs attempt to capture something of this most insular world of classical ballet training.



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Anastasia Lukina and German Borsai rehearse the leading roles in Balanchine's Raymonda Variations for their Graduation Performance. This marked the first time a Balanchine work had been performed by the Academy. Lukina was accepted into the Mariinsky Ballet and Borsai is now performing in Hungary.



Advanced and graduating students onstage at the historic Mariinsky Theater at the close of one of the Academy's 2015 Graduation Performances. Renata Shakirova leads the bows after performing the demanding role of Princess Aurora in the first act of The Sleeping Beauty. A top graduate in her class, she was immediately hired by the Mariinsky Ballet and performed the leading role in Don Quixote in her first season as a professional.